

# U.S.-Soviet Relations Take a Turn

## *Setbacks Threatened On Lithuania, Arms*

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After months of relatively smooth sailing, the U.S.-Soviet relationship has entered dangerous waters as President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev head for their first full-scale summit meeting only seven weeks away.

As revolutions occurred in Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall came down and the two German states moved swiftly toward unification, the Washington-Moscow relationship seemed increasingly strong and stable, a reassuring and important constant in a world that seemed to be turning upside down.

But in the past several weeks, culminating with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's talks here last week, the dramatic progress toward more cooperative U.S.-Soviet relations has begun to fade and the dangers of drift, deadlock and bitter division have begun to return to view. Washington policymakers suddenly have been reminded that even in the Gorbachev era, dealing with the other nuclear superpower is not always a simple matter.

The scheduling of the Washington summit for May 30-June 3, nearly a month earlier than had been expected, makes the next few weeks unusually important. But even as the summit dates were being moved up to meet Gorbachev's scheduling needs, the Soviets were complicating the summit preparations by apparently backtracking on strategic arms concessions they made two months ago when Secretary of State James A. Baker III was in Moscow. And simultaneously, the risk of a major U.S.-Soviet dispute over Lithuania was increasing.

Bush and his top aides have been  
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### LEAFLETS OVER LITHUANIA

A Soviet military helicopter hovers over rally in Vilnius, Lithuania, and drops leaflets denouncing republic's declaration of independence. Story on Page A34.



# U.S.-Soviet Relations Appear Uneasy

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telling Moscow privately for nearly three weeks that the conflict between the Kremlin and the break-away republic of Lithuania presents a serious danger to the overall U.S.-Soviet relationship. In the past several days, the administration has been saying the same publicly, clearly and explicitly.

Because of the Lithuania crisis, "the United States has put our relationship [with the Soviet Union] at risk," White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said Friday. "That is to us the biggest and most valuable asset we have. That to us is the most forceful vehicle for presenting our views." On the same day, Bush and Baker made public statements emphasizing the vital importance of Lithuania to U.S. relations with Moscow.

Officials have been reluctant to say publicly just what the stakes are in the Lithuania conflict or what would happen if things go wrong. Privately, however, a senior administration official said that "we can't sustain the kind of forward-looking, problem-solving attitude toward the Soviet Union, or our support for *perestroika* or for Gorbachev if they crack down in Lithuania."

When the summit dates were accepted by Bush last week, a senior official said, it was made clear to Moscow that this was "contingent" on nothing happening in the meantime that could interfere. A crack-down in Lithuania, this strongly suggests, would put the summit in danger.

Equally worrisome to the administration—and more likely than a violent crackdown—is Soviet intensification of the slice-by-slice "salam tactics" of pressure and intimidation against Lithuania and the other Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia as they struggle to secede from the Soviet Union.

Such pressure tactics by Moscow since late March have already affected congressional and public

opinion in the United States, which is why the administration felt it necessary to issue strong declarations Friday. Further tightening of the screws by Moscow would doubtless bring further erosion of the domestic support for Bush's cautious handling of the Baltic issues.

According to U.S. sources, Shevardnadze made it explicitly clear in talks with Baker that he is deeply concerned about the possibility of an unexpected or uncontrollable incident that creates a crisis in Lithuania. In this respect, the world's most important strategic relationship, that between Washington and Moscow, is for the time being vulnerable to events that may not be controllable from either capital.

The situation in Lithuania might seem to have no conceivable relationship to arcane issues involving sea-launched cruise missiles in a strategic arms treaty. But some senior Washington officials believe Moscow's apparent backtracking on these questions in the arms talks here last week was symptomatic of a broad set of Kremlin troubles that includes the Baltics.

To some practiced Washington eyes, the Soviet leadership seems nervous, troubled and at times unable to cope with an overload of tough decisions at home and abroad. Moreover, the Soviet military and conservatives within the Soviet Communist Party are raising increasingly sharp questions about Gorbachev's policies.

There is broad consensus among Bush administration policymakers that objections from the Soviet military were behind what the Americans said was a clear-cut reversal on sea-launched cruise missiles, one of the most difficult issues in a new strategic arms pact. In Moscow in February, the Soviet negotiators headed by Shevardnadze seemed to accept Baker's basic idea of a "declaratory approach" to dealing with these weapons, under which each side would declare its number of these arms rather than one based

on strict numerical limits and difficult verification. Baker thought he had nailed down this agreement, which he announced at the time.

Last week Soviet negotiators reopened this issue and, in essence, seemed unwilling to accept key elements of the U.S. "declaratory" approach. "It appears that the military was not involved in the decision-making in February," said a senior official. "They accused the negotiators of giving away the store and said they won't accept it, and they let the political leadership know. Now the Soviets are trying to walk it back."

What will happen on cruise missiles and other sticky arms questions in the Soviet Union five weeks from now, when Baker and Shevardnadze meet again as the summit approaches, is anyone's guess. The Soviets could turn out to be adamant, which would undercut the stated goal of Bush and Gorbachev to reach agreement on the basic provisions of the strategic arms treaty by the time of their summit. Or the Soviets might seek to bargain, moving back toward the U.S. approach to cruise missiles in return for concessions on other issues.

In addition, the two sides must continue to grapple with the problem of Germany. At the moment Washington sees the inclusion of a unified Germany in the NATO alliance as central to the U.S. national interest in Europe, and Moscow sees such inclusion as deeply offensive and flatly unacceptable.

Last week Baker interpreted Shevardnadze's private remarks as a recognition that German neutrality "is not the best route to go," though Shevardnadze did not acknowledge this publicly and his aides said he did not make such an explicit statement to Baker. Even if Shevardnadze should agree that neutrality is not ideal, this would be far from a fundamental shift. Moscow still cannot tolerate the idea of the new Germany within the NATO alliance, and at the moment viable alternatives are not in sight.